



## THE KEY INTO LEARNING A NEW LANGUAGE: DO NOT JUST TEACH THE LANGUAGE, LOCALIZE FIRST

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### Abstract:

This study aims to illustrate how to learn a language and whether English as a global language can be learned, taught, and valued in a local context. A mixed qualitative design based on the deductive-axiomatic process in theory generation and phenomenological approach reporting the author's experiences and observations towards learning a language were used in the entire study. The data mining technique was utilized to validate the hypothesis generated. Results reveal that Localization helps to understand that culture plays a very important part in language learning in terms of human relations and clear communication. There is a culture behind a language and learners have to consider this before they study its structure. Additionally, meaning must be well communicated and agreed to avoid misunderstanding. Nevertheless, language learners must be able to have high motivation in taking the risk of learning the target language. Suggestions for future applications were presented.

**Keywords:** cultural dimension; language learning; local culture; perception; context

### 1. Introduction

What makes an effective teacher is not only the knowledge of culture and language but also the understanding of methodologies used in that particular culture. If a teacher uses a method, that does not suit the learners' culture, it may lead to negative effects in language learning.

English in its origin was spoken by basically three tribes 1,500 years ago and currently spoken by at least two billion people around the globe has more non-native speakers of the language. This "hype" makes people think that English is a "*global language*." English has been labelled "*the modern lingua franca*"; the very language used by the merchants, diplomats, and scholars from different countries who are embracing this "*linguistic imperialism*" (González Fernández, 2005).

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English is a reservoir of “*intercultural communication*” or interaction amidst individuals from varied dialectal and ethnic settings. They propose that using communicative strategies that focus on the expansion of the learners’ proficiency aides them in their culturally contextualized communication skills (Ali, Kazemian, & Mahar, 2015). While culture is emphasized as important, the notion that English as a language forms another culture or influence in forming culture is highly questionable.

People construct language based on their experiences within a social context and environment. A person’s language contains the codes, the grammar, and the mode of expression in a society.

Naturally, when learners are highly exposed to the target language, there seem to be ideal situations in learning the language along with its culture (Brands, 2011). Yet, if a language is learned for common or personal motives, the learner has the tendency to discard the “target culture” and shall not adjust or lessen to the chances for syntactical and cultural involvement, performance, and dealings. Clearly, learners’ enthusiasm shows a central part of the effective mastery of a language. Therefore, the cultural acceptance of the target setting is also important in the speed of the learning process.

If someone who immigrated to Australia, for example, does not enjoy or likes the setting he or she may be culturally forced to accept in which the process of immersion plays a negative result as it may be the case of some political refugees who had to leave their native lands. If it is considered that language requires the interaction of created meaning and its interpretation, studying the grammar and vocabulary of a language is not adequate. They have to communicate employing the proper usage of the word (Svalberg, 2007).

People in the academe implement the “study abroad program” to enable learners to gain knowledge of the target language and experience the culture-bound therein (Pourkalhor & Esfandiari, 2017). In this setting, while a learner is exchanging words with native speakers, it does not take long for cultural differences to emerge. Sometimes these differences confuse. Since language and culture are closely interconnected, ignoring the cultural background and norms of a target language can lead to misunderstandings and eventually failure in communication (Emitt & Komesaroff, 2003).

The idea of culture influencing language learning has been tackled by many pragmatists for many decades. Prior studies do not show how to effectively learn a language. However, the fact that culture is the basis of language learning and effective communication has not been accepted by those who claim that language, English in particular, is global and universal. This paper argues that language has to be localized to understand its full essence.

Language teachers need to provide proper input on how to learn a new language with full consideration of content and context.

## 2. Objective

This study aimed to describe how English can be learned, valued, and taught in a clear way: through a local context.

### **3. Material and Methods**

A section contains the research design, sources of data, data-gathering procedure/ theory generation, coding and categorizing, and theoretical sampling/ theory confirmation.

#### **3.1 Research Design**

The current study employed a mixed qualitative method; deductive- axiomatic design to generate a theory (Arnold, Arnold, & Arnold, 2010) (Zalaghi & Khazaei, 2016) as described in the lived experiences of the author about a phenomenon; English language (Creswell, 2013). A deductive- axiomatic procedure begins with the general principles and ends with specific statements, which can be best used for arguments based on laws and other widely accepted principles (Arnold, Arnold, & Arnold, 2010) (Zalaghi & Khazaei, 2016).

#### **3.2 Sources of Data**

This study used desk research, and the lived experiences and observations of the author.

#### **3.3 Data-gathering Procedure/ Theory Generation**

In the development of the theory, the set of axioms were formulated based on the analyses of different references and varied literature on language learning and culture. Thereafter, propositions were formulated after establishing the connections between and among the axioms. Then, personal experiences and observation of the author were used to substantiate the arguments.

The pre- mining tasks involving data cleaning that chiefly underscores on eliminating unrelated and unreliable information, and data integration that concerns on accumulation of facts from several sources to a particular location and a shared format. What follows are the post mining tasks concerning pattern evaluation focusing on pattern identification that represent knowledge, and knowledge presentation which provides discovered rules through visualization and various knowledge portrayal methods.

#### **3.4 Coding and Categorizing**

Like any other studies using deductive axiomatic process in theory development, the axioms and propositions will be derived after open coding. In this process of coding and analysis, the researcher attempts to synthesize the data through constant comparison and some deductive relations.

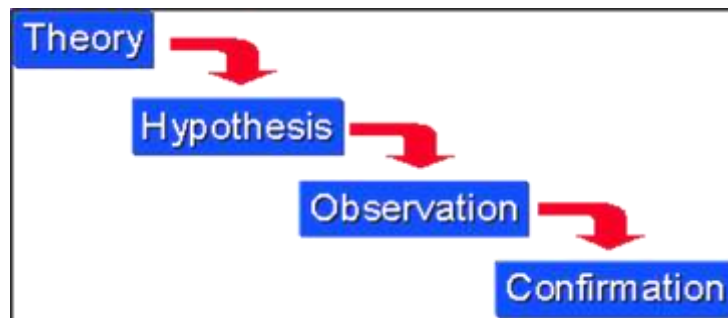
#### **3.5 Theoretical Sampling/ Theory Confirmation**

In this stage the researcher saved, encrypted, and evaluated the information mined then analyzed which truths must merge to create axioms and propositions. The emerging and selected axioms will give more direction to create propositions. The criteria of theoretical purpose and relevance were applied and to the ongoing data analysis at the same time as the theory is being built deductively. This method ensures the data's relevance to the

emerging theory. Data mining technique was used to validate the generated theory in this study.

### 3.6 Theory Generation Process

Figure 1 shows the theory generation process.



**Figure 1:** Theory Generation Process (Glasser, 1978)

#### 3.6.1 Axioms

Axiom 1: Meanings attached to language differ from culture to culture.

Axiom 2: Time and space effects language learning as learners co-create and mutually negotiate meaning.

#### 3.6.2 Proposition

Language influences thought, memory and perception with specific tools used for learning communication and its cultural dimension.

#### 3.6.3 The Theory

Localization is significant to understand the target language. By localization, for the learner to learn another language, the learner should learn as much about the culture of the place he or she intends to travel to or the people from that area where he or she intends to communicate. In other words, no use learning Australian culture if the learner intends to travel, reside or study in Canada.

Local culture influences thought, memory, and perception. These tools are not universal and cannot be globalized since different cultures exist in different demographic settings. Culture and language have a vigorous relationship. It is through assessment of the relations of culture and language that this consciousness and its application can fully be developed. Therefore, localization is an important key in language learning.

## 4. Results and Discussion

Localization influences language learning. Language is local and cannot be global in its true essence. The succeeding discussion elaborated this claim.

This study showed how should language be fully understood and learned in a local context with full consideration of the culture imbued in it.

#### 4.1 The culture within a language

In Japan, attention/ apology and gratitude words like “Sumimasen”, “Gomenasai”, “Arigato-gozaïmasu”, “Arigato-gozaïmashita” and “Domo” are words so often confused by learners of Japanese language due to the learner’s lack of cultural knowledge of Japan and thus, quite often misused. When one tries to get another’s attention, he or she says: “Sumimasen”, but this term is also used when one is to apologize in a softer manner of the meaning. The term “Gomenasai” is never used to get attention but to apologize. “Gomenasai” and how to set your tone into it will decide the manner of its effectiveness and to know this, one has to know the Japanese culture to know its effective uses. The impact and meaning of “Gomenasai” are very different than that of “Sumimasen” while the interpretations are both apologies.

Furthermore, “Arigato” or “Arigato- gozaïmasu” and “Arigato- gozaïmashita” all mean “thank you” but their usages are also different. The first two terms are used often on different occasions to mean thank you or thank you very much. However, the word “Arigato- gozaïmashita” is used by the salesperson to convey gratitude to the customer for dropping by and purchasing a product from them. It is not used by the average person to thank another and never used by a customer.

The same is true with the Chinese saying “xiexie”. If Westerners interpret this situation the same as Chinese people do, it will be a sign of impoliteness. This misunderstanding is due to language learners’ lack of knowledge and consciousness of the target language’s culture (Xiao, 2010).

The phrases of “high-context culture” and “low-context culture” as Edward Hall (Hall E., 2005) had put it may help in understanding the part and significance of culture in language studies as well as language teaching. Communication in a high context culture is not totally in speaking or writing but also through elements that are more towards body language, tone of voice and a person’s status in society.

These contextual elements are not defined or clear in the eyes of outsiders. However, among the group raised in such societies, it is the way of communication. Such cultures also have their unique vocabularies which are also vague in the eyes of low context cultures as it can be seen in some of the words used in the Japanese language.

One word so often confusing for the learner of the Japanese language is the usage word “Domo.” When someone expresses gratitude to a person, using the word “Domo” can mean “you are welcome.” The cultural meaning of “Domo” is in some ways indescribable even by many average Japanese. It is as if attached to the word “Domo” there should be a mystery sign as if to say: read or get my feeling without me saying it. Such usage of terms and words are understood only by certain societies using similar high context culture communication words. “Domo” can be understood by Iranians to some extent as they have a similar term “Esteda miokonam” which is used very much like the Japanese. Language is definitely culturally connected and used based on society. It exists for the purpose of communicating with each other.

Most English language teachers in Japan are Caucasian of European race or who are born in the major English-speaking countries such as Canada, England, Australia, and the United States. These nations among others are low context culture nations. In low

context cultures, clear and unambiguous rules in their language are the means of expression among its members. An example of the low context culture's communication is the expression of a deep feeling, *I Love You*. While, the expression can be used in a deep or light form in low context culture, in Japan (a high context culture), the term is a private expression and rarely expressed publicly. If ever, it is publicly expressed by the Japanese, it has the deepest meaning; and still not as clear (Hall E. T., 1976).

Looking at this picture, having an understanding of culture, the learner is aware of the roots and the development of the language. When language learning does not include culture, understanding and communicating in the target language is a huge challenge (Oaster, 2017). To fully comprehend a language, it is most important to recognize and appreciate the culture within it.

Understanding the culture of the target language saves someone from offending others and from humiliation. That means the person knows who, how, and when to address others. Learners' responsiveness and good command of the target language can improve by exploring the connection between language and culture (Kuang, 2007).

This connection is strengthened by familiarizing oneself with the culture of the target language aside from the language itself (Hopwood, 2017). In the entire Philippine archipelago, for instance, only the people from Luzon use the term "po" and "ho" in their statements to show respect to elders and to those in authority. Even when talking to strangers, Filipinos, regardless of age use these terms to show respect to the person they are talking to. Nevertheless, people in the Visayas also show respect by using the terms "kuya" (literally older brother) and "ate" (literally older sister) however, it could be offensive in the case where an old lady is calling a seller in his/her 20s "kuya/ate", instead she can call him "dong" (little brother) or "day" (little sister). So, it is easy to identify if one is a native of Manila or Visayas and Mindanao.

The Japanese also uniquely use of the word "chan" in their culture and language learning. The initial word that foreign students who learn about the Japanese language associated with "chan" are "aka chan," which means baby but in literary terms "aka" is red and "chan" maybe one or person. While the word is mostly associated with children, it is quite common that people of close relationships add "chan" to the names associated with their close friends. This goes without the limitation of age. However, culturally this term was not used and may still not be used when a person became of adolescent age or in another period in life as a person becomes a mother or a father. While "chan" is a friendly term and used by those who feel close or see the other person close to him or her, it is unique when and where to use the term "chan."

You cannot call your boss or supervisor "chan" unless you want to be fired. The significance of this notion of "chan" is unique to its location, cultural usage, and status of the people.

Different culture uses different literal meaning to the words they use for children alone. "aka chan" used as one word to label a baby, is the same word as "Bache" in Farsi, the language used by Iranians. While cultures may have similar grammar, the words' meaning, and usage are quite different due to beliefs as well as geographical location. The grammar of Farsi is very similar to Japanese, but the meaning of words and usages

is not the same. In Iran, for example, the term “ba-che”, meaning little one, seems to be the same in meaning as “aka chan”, but the term “che” is never used in the same way as it is used in Japan.

Attempting to absorb any language and not considering its culture is risky and will produce an ‘automated’ learner (Hopwood, 2017). Unfortunately, there are language learners who struggle to accept the culture of the language they are trying to learn. In this situation, a person may communicate the content but will fail in delivering the context. When individuals from diverse cultures interact, the message being sent could be misinterpreted causing the communication gap (Fowler, 2013). Therefore, any learner studying a new language needs to open his/her horizons to see another perspective about life and language specifically (Hopwood, 2017).

#### **4.2 Homographs in context**

Having a complex vocabulary, learners may find it confusing studying homographs where words have similar spelling but vary in sound or similar spelling and sound but vary in meaning. This aspect of the language could bring and confuse any learner. Nevertheless, the researcher would focus on homographs.

In Cebuano, the word “sili” may both refer to chili pepper and male genitals. Unlike the former example where the stress can be the clue for its meaning, this word is stressed and pronounced in the same way which brings confusion to a new language learner. It could be offensive and may embarrass the speaker who is not aware of its usage. Thus, the speaker must be aware of the words that he is using so the receiver will not misinterpret his message.

The usage of the word “shibuee” (of astringent taste) in Japan is not even commonly used among the native English speakers’ everyday language as most Canadians and Americans would not know because it is not so culturally embedded in their everyday usage. In cases when the researcher asked his fellow native speakers if they know the feeling of astringent taste, most could not describe it or simply did not know it unless an extra description was added. It is like biting into an unripe banana or a green banana and that made the description clearer.

The term “shibuee” goes beyond the feeling of biting in something stringent. It is also used to describe the character of a person. To say: *Ano Hito Wa Shibuee Desu*, means *that a person is not so nice and friendly*. In Japan, “shibuee” may be used to describe a feeling or a person’s mood or character is only used based on the culture and location of that society. For the same term of “Ano Hito Wa Shibuee Desu,” the Iranians say “Gushte Taraf Talkhe” which means, *that a person’s meat tastes bitter*. These descriptions are culturally connected and related to the way society feels about a certain taste and relates the taste into a person’s character description.

In Cebu, the Philippines, the term that describes astringent taste is “aplod” and it is used to describe the taste and not beyond that. Thus, the word “aplod” is not applicable to describe a person’s behavior unlike in the Japanese and Iranian settings.

In the aforementioned contexts, certain words cannot be interchangeably used in some cultures while others permit. While communicative competence involves

“negotiation of intended meanings” in realistic contexts of the target language, intercultural competence deals with this feature across cultures (Kramsch, 2006).

It would not be appropriate to learn Australian English when a person intends to travel to the United States, and that person could be misunderstood or be laughed at and end up embarrassed. For example, Australian English for “today” is pronounced /*todai*/ (it is interpreted as “to die” in American English) and be misunderstood. This situation can confuse any learner’s motivation and hinder language learning.

### **4.3 Cultural deficiency and intercultural communication**

Some may argue that the good side of having all these considerations in understanding and learning the culture of a language by taking the risk in using the target language is one of the keys to learning a language. While it may be true, it should be considered that the negative consequences can be devastating.

In October 1992, a misunderstanding of the word “freeze” with the word “please” caused the death of a 16- year old Japanese boy in the United States causing shockwaves throughout the world (Japan Today, 2012). In 2014, a nine-year-old Vietnamese origin died in the hospital due to the language barriers (Healthitoutcomes, 2014). While it could be argued that these incidents are rare to the extent of death, but it remains true that deficiency in comprehending both its culture and its language used by both cultures is important. Regardless of the dangers of miscommunication, the other aspect of learning a language is the absolute willingness to learn. The motivation to learn a language is vital in achieving this goal because all efforts will be put to waste if there is no self-drive to learn a language.

In the case of the researcher, despite the low motivation to learn a target language, the researcher was able to communicate with the natives on a cultural level. In more than five years of stay in the Philippines, and only knowing some words and expressions in Bisaya or Cebuano, the researcher had very little need for the usage of the other languages. This is because most Filipinos understand English as it is the medium of instruction in school. So, the researcher just focused on the cultural aspects of the environment and had learned to communicate effectively, live in the Philippines for the length of time to study, and be successful to the point of winning the votes of the researcher university classmates and win consecutive election terms as President of the Graduate School Student Organization as the first non-Filipino president in the organization’s history. This was due to the researcher ability to understand how to culturally communicate and not based on the technical competence of the local language. In the case of the Japanese language, the researcher motive in going to Japan was initially to teach English and save money to return to Canada. There was no motivation to learn the Japanese language since teachers are usually strongly discouraged to use Japanese in the classroom. Many foreign teachers are told not to use Japanese in the classroom in Japan. Even those who speak fluently are at times scolded or not have their contract renewed. Such language schools usually market their schools for having their teachers use immersion methods of teaching. This attracts parents who want their children to be



bilingual and adult clients who have the belief that if they listen to English speaking people, talk in English only environment, the learners can easily learn to speak fluently. While claims by Krashen's affective filter hypothesis (Krashen, 1988) in the belief that language can be learned through motivation, there is evidence contradictory to the effectiveness' of affective filter hypothesis (Du, 2009). The researcher's low motivation to learn languages has made him/her ability to communicate to the Japanese and Filipino native speakers using English but being understood because he/she communicates through the culture of the local language.

Mastering the language would require more than knowledge of culture, one has to be customized following the target language. It must emphasize learners' self-awareness and educators must help in increasing the learners' language and cultural identities to improve their communication competence (Rassokha, 2005). Also, language schools must familiarize learners with the major differences in the cultural patterns to entirely learn a new language (Schmidt, 1997). Nevertheless, teachers have to be competent in communicating the language containing its culture to promote inter-cultural awareness (Emitt & Komesaroff, 2003).

#### **4.4 Confusion within the same language**

Ethnographically, in observing the collective and ethnic contexts of members in a certain group, it is observable that within a culture, language develops geographically (Zhang, Jin, Shen, Zhang, & Hoff, 2008). Furthermore, culture develops its language for the means of accommodating communication between people within the geographical location which simply put: language is localized.

The usage of the word "promise" is a small example of the localization of English. With English being the medium of teaching for over a hundred years, Filipinos have adopted the language as their official language (not the national language) and use it quite often. When a Filipino says the word "promise", it usually means "I Swear." Another is when Filipinos say "wait for a moment" is "for a while." Localized English language goes as far as renaming or recreating its meanings based on the culture even if the language enforced is a foreign language.

However, enforced language is never as effective as the native language in expressing oneself. There had been a few heated discussions between the researcher and some Filipinos where at the head of the conversation, the Filipino expressed: "I can say that in my language but not in English." Even though the person was highly educated and a major in English, it seems one's native language is more convenient to express ideas explicitly.

The Japanese language was made by the Japanese people to communicate among themselves and as its population grew, the locals tailored their words to communicate better locally. A person living in the Hokkaido area speaks quite different from that of a person living in Hiroshima and/or Fukuoka. The language varies so much that many agree they cannot understand the "Japanese" of each other. Localization of a language does not make society non-Japanese. It simply clarifies that words used in one area are formulated and interpreted differently than the original meaning and another area.

Not only in Japan but also in many countries, the notion of the same language but the different meaning is clear. In the eastern province of Canada: Nova Scotia and Newfoundland where English is spoken but most Ontarians never understand their English.

English may be used as a language, but language cannot form culture. As discussed above, it is the culture that forms a language. Regardless of the same language, it is a cultural influence on that same word that formulates a non-universal and non-global meaning to “English.”

Culture is not only the founder of a language and formulates it from the beginning, but also refines it in time. What used to be *pocketbook* as a lady’s handbag became a *purse* and then transformed its name to a *handbag* from the 1970s to 2019. What used to be “Fine thank you” as the response to the question: “How are you?” is now “I am good”. If learners are deprived of the target language’s ethnic appreciation, they shall never use it like natives do (Peterson & Coltrane, 2003) (Ali, Kazemian, & Mahar, 2015). Therefore, languages are localized to the culture one is aiming to learn and not globalized due to cultural norms and values that affect its usage and meaning.

## 5. Recommendations

It is important to employ localization while learning a language in improving proficiency exams and to be more accurate in measuring comprehension of the language learner. Students must be well-motivated to learn a localized language. Also, schools can re-align or revise their methods to teach effectively. Finally, this study will serve as a good reference to enrich existing methods in teaching language and productive communication.

## 6. Conclusion

The study revealed the realization that an individual cannot exist without a society (the smallest being a family). In the form of society, its culture is formed and language will be one of the tools to communicate among the members of that particular society. Some outsider who knows a particular family will comment on a youngster of that family and says: *You sound just like your father or mother*. This notion is a cultural thing that is localized to its elders and traditions. A language dies when the entire society dies with its culture. It revives when a new society starts using it for its means of communication, but today’s language is not the same as the language used in the same society decades earlier. As localities change, so does its language used for the better communication of its members. Changes in language mean the changes coming from the culture and not from the language. The versatility of language also makes it impossible to globalizing it. Many would claim that we are living in a comprehensive world plus the advent of knowledge, science and technology, and fast use of the internet, the world is getting closer and English is used to bring this all possible. However, it is very clear that when it comes to actual communication, language and language learning leads to not only culture but also

a culture that is localized. Therefore, to study a language, one must first consider localization of the target language and understand the culture behind it.

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